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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 001847

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS); LONDON FOR TSOU; PARIS FOR
WALLER

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TAGS: PREL PHUM LE IS TU

SUBJECT: TFLE01: TUNISIAN FOREIGN MINISTER EXPRESSES
CONCERN ABOUT SITUATION IN LEBANON; BEMOANS "EXPLOITATION"
OF THE ISSUE BY TUNISIAN GROUPS

Classified By: Ambassador William Hudson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In a July 18 farewell call by the Ambassador, Foreign Minister Abdallah expressed concern about the "grave" humanitarian situation in Lebanon, noting his impression that the violence was not going to end soon. As a jurist, he said, he was "shocked" that an armed group could be allowed to challenge the authority of the state. Turning to the negative regional implications of the ongoing violence, he lamented, "We did not need this -- it only complicates the situation."

¶2. (C) Abdallah told the Ambassador that there are approximately 700 Tunisians resident in Lebanon, the majority of whom are dual nationals or Tunisians married to Lebanese not seeking evacuation. He reported that Tunisia had evacuated "less than 100" tourists. (Note: Embassy does not have an exact count of Tunisian evacuees, but other MFA contacts reported that 30 Tunisians had been evacuated by bus to Syria on July 17, and another 20 on July 18. Local media reported that the Tunisian Embassy in Beirut evacuated by bus "about 30" Tunisians from Beirut to Syria, and that another hundred Tunisian citizens had departed Lebanon by their own means. End Note.) Abdallah said that so far, there had been no Tunisian victims. He noted, however, that a bomb had fallen approximately 500 meters from the Tunisian Embassy in Beirut, but that Tunisian Embassy staff had retreated to a shelter (NFI) in the Embassy basement.

¶3. (C) Commenting that Tunis had tried to play a moderating role when the Arab League discussed this issue at last weekend's meeting, he said that there had been problems between the Saudis and the Syrians, the result of which was a compromise text that "is not very serious." Abdallah ended by noting that Tunisia faces its own public opinion challenge on this issue. Probably referring to an attempted pro-Nasrallah demonstration prevented by the police on July 17, Abdallah complained that, "Certain political parties and NGO's are seeking to exploit the situation." He noted that this phenomenon occurs whenever there is violence or tension in the Israeli/Palestinian context. (Note: According to media reports, the July 17 demonstration was called for by eight labor unions belonging to the Union Generale Tunisiene du Travail (UGTT). The Conseil National pour les Libertes en Tunis (CNLT) and the media reported that 500 labor union members -- a number we believe to be inflated -- gathered in front of UGTT headquarters in downtown Tunis to express their condemnation of Israel's "aggression" against Lebanon and Gaza. Demonstrators chanted pro-Nasrallah slogans, including "We offer our lives and blood as a sacrifice for you, Nasrallah!" In addition to carrying Lebanese, Palestinian, and Iraqi flags, they were holding banners which read, "Death to Israel" and, "Death to America." Police prevented the

demonstrators from moving from Ali Zouaioui square, a closed area generally used for UGTT gatherings, toward the Habib Bourguiba Avenue thoroughfare. End Note.)

HUDSON